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## HIGH-SCHOOL COURSES IN THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Many of our high schools provide a course, of a year or less, in the history of English literature. From my own observation I infer that the subject is usually presented in the form of recitations based upon a manual, dissociated from any connected reading of English literature itself. The aim of the course is, apparently, to teach the pupil the external facts of the subject, through his memorizing of names and approximate dates, through his reading of criticisms of author's works, and through his classifying of literary phenomena in rational groups or periods. We have all listened to recitations in such a course, have heard pupils discuss authors and works unknown to them outside the textbook, and have heard them outline literary movements without having definite acquaintance with a single concrete literary production of the period.

During the last few years I have occasionally been called upon to provide simple test questions in the history of English literature for students applying for admission to college by examination, and have had an opportunity to make observations as to the attainments of high-school pupils in this subject, and as to the relative value of this particular sort of discipline. I resist the temptation to cite grotesque perversions of fact on the part of the candidates, and I waive the question as to whether the course as now organized is efficiently taught. I wish merely to venture the opinion that, whether the high-school graduate remembers or forgets what he learns in such a course, his time has not been profitably spent.

This opinion—by no means novel—has been suggestively developed recently by a teacher of French literature in a French

secondary school.<sup>1</sup> In publishing his *De la méthode littéraire*, Monsieur Bezard has rendered a courageous and generous service. Through the ample pages of this *journal d'un professeur* we are admitted to all the intimate pedagogical minutiae of a course offered to students some seventeen years of age, during their last regular year in the French *lycée*. This diary provides a complete account of daily assignments, of recitations, and of pedagogical devices. The writer not only outlines the program and equipment of the course, but he also frankly discloses every detail of daily practice, the occupations of the classroom from moment to moment—black-board exercises, interruptions, blunders, and corrections. We have both the text examined in class and the analysis achieved, both the inquiries of the pupil and the responses of the teacher. The writer never takes refuge in comfortable generalizations. All pedagogical difficulties, theoretical or practical, are frankly met, and the results are candidly reported. However triumphant these results may seem to us American readers, the disclosures are submitted merely as modest confessions.

In addressing his pupils at the opening of his course, Monsieur Bezard launches the following challenge: "Vous préférez de plus en plus le manuel au texte classique, la leçon apprise en toute hâte à l'auteur lentement médité, l'art de mal réciter à l'art de bien écrire."<sup>2</sup> It is clear, then, that Monsieur Bezard's course represents a protest against the practice of teaching literary history from a handbook, and in view of our American high-school tradition, we may well inquire as to the remedies suggested in France.

The course outlined by Monsieur Bezard consists of three parts: (1) the presenting of the essential facts of the history of French literature, (2) the reading of selected works of representative authors, and (3) the writing of themes based upon the works read.

For presenting the facts of literary history the writer has no surprising invention to reveal, for he frankly adopts the principle of chronology—a chronology, to be sure, tempered by common-

<sup>1</sup> J. Bezard, *De la méthode littéraire: Journal d'un professeur dans une classe de première*. Paris: Librairie Vuibert, 63 Boulevard Saint-Germain, 1911. 738 pp. in 8vo.

<sup>2</sup> P. 4.

sense. He begins not with the earliest literary monuments, but with the distinctly modern period. He groups the historical facts under five large ideas, as follows:

1. Les caractères de la Science au début du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, ou Les origines de la Raison classique.
2. Le triomphe de la Raison dans l'Art, ou L'esprit classique au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle.
3. Les progrès de la Raison dans la Société. Philosophes et hommes du monde au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle.
4. La révolte du Sentiment, ou Les origines du Romantisme et la Révolution française.
5. L'application de la méthode classique à l'époque contemporaine. Du Romantisme au Réalisme.

Each of these ideas characterizes a literary epoch to which from ten to twenty recitations are devoted, and in which only a restricted number of authors are noticed. The few important external facts concerning these authors and their works are quickly collected by the pupils from books of reference. Actual practice is given in class in taking biographical and bibliographical notes.

The student gains his essential knowledge of the history of French literature, however, not from the external facts collected, but from the reading of significant works of representative authors. The pieces chosen for reading are comparatively short, and they are studied intensively. Each text is carefully analyzed and summarized in writing, and the ideas of the piece are definitely related to the general idea of the period within which it falls. In class, model analyses are made, in the course of which every detail is elucidated.

Still more essential and characteristic in the course is the uniting of literature and composition. The course aims at more than a mastery of the facts of literary history, and at more than a thorough knowledge of representative masterpieces; it undertakes also to cultivate the pupil's power of expression. Monsieur Bezard states his principle as follows:

La lecture n'est qu'un moyen, non un but. L'éducation de l'avenir sera de moins en moins livresque, de plus en plus tournée vers les réalités, vers l'observation directe de la vie présente et l'acquisition de méthodes propres à nous faire réussir dans d'utiles entreprises. Sur ce principe se fonderont à la fois notre *méthode d'observation* et nos *procédés d'expression*, c'est-à-dire

la manière de prendre des notes, la manière de composer et de rédiger les devoirs.<sup>1</sup>

It appears, then, that critical attention is given not only to a mastery of the ideas embodied in important works, but also to the form in which the assimilation of these ideas is evidenced in written outlines and in original themes. Concerning the relation of themes to the masterpieces studied, Monsieur Bezard says further:

La méthode qui vous aura servi à comprendre les classiques vous conduira sans autre effort à les imiter dans vos *devoirs*. . . . Enseignement par l'image ou enseignement par les faits, confessions personnelles ou récits d'incidents empruntés à votre existence d'écoliers constituent à tous les âges d'excellents exercices. Pourtant, même dans ces classes, j'essaierais de les rattacher toujours à l'étude des auteurs, afin que vous fussiez aidés par des exemples, encouragés par des modèles, sans avoir tout à tirer de votre expérience naïve.<sup>2</sup>

Every fortnight or so is presented a theme which is directly inspired by ideas in the works under examination in class, and which consists primarily in an application of these ideas to the life of the period studied or to modern life. After appropriating the idea of an author, that is to say, the pupil develops it in the light of his own reason and experience. The following are examples of the subjects so developed:

Le président de Lamoignon écrit à Boileau pour le remercier de lui avoir envoyé l'*Arrêt burlesque*.

Lettre de Madame de Sévigné à Monsieur de Coulanges, momentanément éloigné de Paris. Elle lui envoie la première édition des *Pensees* (1670).

Quel est le sens du mot "précieux"?

Napoléon disait à Goethe: "Votre tragédie est une histoire, et la nôtre est une crise." Expliquez ce propos et appréciez-le.

Pourquoi dit-on: "le bon LaFontaine"?

Dialogue entre l'abbé d'Olivet et un grand seigneur de l'Académie sur la candidature de Voltaire.

D'où vient le succès récent de *Ruy Blas* dans un théâtre populaire?

Each of these subjects is carefully explained in class in due season. In the course of the year about a score of themes are written—several for each literary epoch.

From the point of view of practical pedagogy one of the most suggestive of Monsieur Bezard's devices is the *cahier*. Each pupil possesses a huge notebook, of about two hundred pages, which

<sup>1</sup>P. 10. The word *devoir* is adequately translated by our word *theme*.

<sup>2</sup>Pp. 11-12.

serves as the comprehensive repository for all his written work. In this book are collected not only all the transactions of the classroom, but also the summaries and analyses of all books read, biographical and bibliographical notes concerning the principal authors, and the themes and individual reflections of the student. This notebook becomes a veritable history of the national literature, a history in which the abstract facts of a manual are supplanted by the vital, individual entries of the pupil himself.

Let it be repeated, however, that the most enlightening principle of the French course before us is the uniting of composition and literature; and let it be noted that this principle accords admirably with a new stimulus now being felt in the teaching of composition in America. In various quarters arises the conviction that it is more profitable for mature students to operate with ideas than with objects, and that ideas may be most conveniently and appropriately acquired through literature. Probably most teachers agree that in his first efforts in composition—in the grammar school and during the opening years of the high-school course—the pupil may well deal with the simple objects of daily life. At this stage his immaturity and his preoccupation with grammatical and mechanical correctness preclude the ready use of his reason or imagination. During his later high-school course, however, the pupil may profitably appropriate ideas and points of view from literature, and with his new intellectual baggage may travel, however falteringly, along fresh paths of composition.

What is suggested here, I must insist, is neither a course in literature punctuated by an occasional theme, nor a course in composition mercifully cheered on by an occasional bit of reading, but rather, an orderly use of literature to stimulate the pupil's writing, and an incisive use of themes to enforce the wisdom of literature. That the pupil will immediately gain a "feeling for style" from his writing under such contact, we should not, of course, expect. From the literary models constantly before him he will, to be sure, receive additions to his vocabulary, a tonic for his sentences, and a rationale for his paragraphs. Best of all, however, his intelligence will be constantly challenged by ideas really worth acquiring, and his impulse toward self-expression will be supplied with reflections really worth writing.